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Plant-life in a World of Differential Becoming: A Speculative Inquiry **Dr Carole Baker**

Follow me while I take you off the beaten track, to the margins, where, in the half-light we are barely able to discern the shadowy forms all around us, unable to recognize them, whilst feeling the faintest sense of familiarity, of déjà vu. For here lie those that have been banished from the centre; devalued, made other, mere shadows of their former plenitude.

This inquiry concerns a marginalized group, one subjected to the systematic manipulation and exploitation of humans over many centuries. Collectively they are known (by humans) as ‘plants’. The new planetary consciousness of science was reflected in the global scale and functions of European maritime expeditions between 16th and 20th centuries.¹ Plant Hunters (the Tradescants, Banks, Masson, Humboldt, Douglas, Hooker, Fortune, the Lobbs – Veitch’ nursery which opened in 1808 in Devon alone employed 22, Wilson, Forrest, Kingdon-Ward) searched the globe for living vegetation. They imagined the establishment of vast archives of texts, images, artefacts, and specimens, patiently assembled, through which the geography and natural history of the earth could be made known.² For Deborah Cherry “it was ‘the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project’ that earth was transformed into world, land into landscape.”³

My own ‘English’ courtyard garden, a Wunderkammer, of extraordinary beings: Hornbeams that can live for over 300 years; New Zealand Flax prized by Maori weavers who fashioned it into clothing, baskets, sails, splints for broken bones and the Damask Rose, harvested in Isfahan to extract its precious Rose Water. Traces of a wondrous world beyond the sea; Japanese Snowbell, Russian Sage, Abyssinian Sword-Lily, Oriental Poppy, Oak-leaved Hydrangea from the woodlands of the southeastern United States, and Cosmos from the pine and oak forests of Mexico, filling the air with the fragrance of vanilla and chocolate.

The greater the knowledge accumulated of the earth, the more wealth can be gained through exploitation of the known.

A ‘colonial’, controlling, acquisitive knowledge rises “above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant”, and seeks to subjugate and oppress. Such knowledge allows one to dominate and exercise authority over another; denying autonomy to it. “... it exists, in a sense, as we know it.”⁴

In 1735 Carl Linnaeus published his book *Systema Naturae*, outlining his “classificatory system designed to categorize all plant forms on the planet...” in a “documentary, totalizing approach” associated “with forms of state bureaucracy...”. Bureaucracy and militarization

¹ Driver, F *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* University of Chicago Press, 2005

² Ibid.

³ Cherry, D ‘Earth into World, Land into Landscape’, in Beaulieu and Roberts *Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, 2002

⁴ Said, E W *Orientalism* Penguin, 2003: 32

are the central instruments of empire..."⁵ This continues today with molecular phylogenetic analysis which is producing unprecedented amounts of information....

"When a thing is named by another [the one who evaluates and signifies], the affects of power are foregrounded and the capacity for the named being to be able to express itself freely is diminished."⁶

Naming destroys our harmonious relation with another; it is now known to us, a representative of its species.

The power of the coloniser lies in their ability to appropriate and incorporate the other, "I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk."⁷ In response, the colonized can claim the space of the margins as a place of resistance, a site of creativity and power, where the oppressed and exploited can recover and move in solidarity to erase the category of colonized/colonizer.

"The colonising self does not interact with or encounter the other as independent other, but only in the image of its own desires or needs, which it imposes upon them."⁸ "An encounter with the pre-conceived is no encounter, but a reification of self..."⁹

Bridging the distance that separates us from material things, we eat (or drink) them up.... [In Hegel's dialectical principle of negation] We make a thing our own and appropriate it all the better, the more we negate its immediate givenness, or, the manner in which it stands over and against us. A thorough act of appropriation is the one that destroys the appropriated object, morphing it into an integral part of the proprietor.... The vegetal 'other' becomes a part and parcel of the 'same', the eater, who, in negating its otherness, elevates it to what Hegel would deem to be a higher end of sustaining a human body. The mystery of eating is, precisely, this event of establishing a hidden dialectical identity of the eater and the eaten: I am what I eat..."¹⁰

The empiricist colonizer devours with his eyes. Martin Jay¹¹ proposes an "optical theory of colonial power" that contributed to the establishment of the global overseas empires of Europe. Visual technologies, and the image practices and protocols of seeing associated with them, were transformed through their entanglement in colonial and imperial projects. *"Photography has had long associations with colonialist modes of observation, categorization, and objectification; the 'documentary gaze' has had an enduring, powerfully*

⁵ Pratt, M L *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* Routledge, 1992 p35

⁶ Gardner, C and MacCormack, P *Deleuze and the Animal* Edinburgh University Press, 2017

⁷ hooks, bell 'Marginality as Site of Resistance' in Ferguson, R *Out there: marginalization and contemporary cultures* MIT Press, 1990 p341-343

⁸ Plumwood, V *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, 1993: 158

⁹ McCormack, P (ed) *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory* Bloomsbury Academic, 2014: 3

¹⁰ Marder, M *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* Columbia University Press, 2014

¹¹ Martin Jay, Sumathi Ramaswamy (eds) *Empires of Vision: A Reader* Duke University Press, 2014

haunting scope.”¹² The researcher’s relationship with those (both human and nonhuman) that one encounters ‘in the field’ is often portrayed as “a classical colonial encounter in which the fieldworker lords it over her/his respondents.”¹³

Stay a while longer with me here in the half-light, at the borders of civilisation, with the unformed; those who have not been shaped by the light of reason. As we rest awhile our senses heighten... we hear the rhythmical sound of our own breathing, and the breath of countless others, smell the musty, earthiness of life being lived and feel the ethereal energies that swirl around and within us.

The difficulty and cost of constructing an inventory of global nature was high and the disjuncture between fieldworkers who created knowledge ‘on the spot’ and scientific mastery (dependent on the distanced observer) that was acceptable at home, and the ruptures existing between science and aesthetics and between holistic and analytical views of nature produced a “not always settled knowledge”¹⁴. “Knowledge of the earth is constructed through experience, learning, memory and imagination.”¹⁵

Marder writes that “...the marginality of plants dissimulates their indispensability to ‘art and society.’

“The forgetting of the growing trees, herbs, or flowers [in Western philosophy] corresponds to and stems from the forgetting of being in the midst of attempts to name it. Our ethical failures – be they in relation to other human beings, animals, or plants – are the direct consequences of this forgetting that consistently drives us out of this world and away from the material ground of our lives, that commits us to a ‘higher’ reality, and that devalues whatever or whoever surrounds us.”¹⁶

The “human has been, thus far, erroneously conceived as an entity, rather than a relation of the one to the other.” For Irigaray the human is “not a cultural, much less biological, given but a still unaccomplished task... we have not yet become human.”

Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza’s affective ethics, provides us with new potentialities of being with others beyond the dualism of personal feelings and collective emotions. “Spinoza offers a theory of the good, powerful and joyful life by asking what bodies can *do*? Rather than an unrestrained, irresponsible and individualistic quest for power and freedom, this suggests that we enhance our capacities to affect and be affected by relating to a variety of different bodies.”¹⁷ The greater the ability of others to express, the greater the diversity of affective encounters. It is only in our proximate, entangled attachments to real others, wrestling with “feelings of love, guilt, shame that make us struggle to decide how to act ...in

¹² Desjarlais, J ‘Seared with Reality: Phenomenology through Photography, in Nepal’, in Ram, K and Houston, C *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A Sense of Perspective* Indiana University Press: 7

¹³ Thrift, N ‘Practising Ethics’ in Pryke, M, Rose, G, Whatmore, S *Using Social Theory: Thinking Through Research* Sage, 2003: 106.

¹⁴ Driver, F *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* University of Chicago Press, 2005

¹⁵ Driver, F *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* University of Chicago Press, 2005

¹⁶ Marder, M *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* Columbia University Press, 2014 p176

¹⁷ Thanem, T and Wallenberg, L *Organization: The Critical Journal of Organization, Theory and Society*, 2015, vol. 21, no. 2, special issue on ‘Ethics, Embodiment and Organizations’.

given situations.”¹⁸ One must be open to experiment to discover which encounters will generate joy and which alliances will be harmonious, since this is impossible to know in advance.

Balibar¹⁹ calls this ‘transindividuality’, where individuals are singular, unique and separate yet related in ‘an infinite multiplicity of other individuals’. As individuals, humans incorporate other individuals such as air and water molecules, nutrients and bacteria, and are incorporated into larger social individuals such as organizations and communities. Such relations make individuals more complex, interdependent and autonomous: ‘The more complex an individual is, the more relationships it will have with the external world’, the more it will have in common with others, and the better capable will it be to join with others in ‘a “collective” or superior individual’ which does not curtail its freedom.²⁰

Art practice, in its multiplicity (of focus, methodologies and materials), its incorporation of extra-rational faculties; imagination, sympathetic intuition, inspiration, and its alignment with experimentation, allows exciting and imperative potentialities for the evolution of society. Plants in their rooting, shooting and fruiting, are analogous to art which is generative, regenerative, which cross-fertilizes and unfolds in myriad forms. What can art *do*?

Manning writes that art as process is ‘not yet about an object, about a form, or a content’, but through affect which can make others feel and change, it is about ‘the intuitive potential to activate the future’.²¹

“Ascribing greater status to plant life is a political act, and art that draws attention to this shift in structures of legitimacy is also political.”²²

Irigaray leaves us with an image of Buddha contemplating a flower. The look is one of nondomineering attention that respects the “flower’s integrity”²³ It accompanies the growth of the flower without indifference, grows *with* it, and welcomes it in all its otherness...”. Unlike knowledge, which “focuses on an entity as a totality, perception accentuates the fine grains of difference, particularly the spaces in between, which we usually overlook ... It is in the in-between of a genuine encounter.. that life, freedom, and difference blossom and that we, too, gain the space necessary for living and flourishing.”

Let us remain in the shadowy margins to which we are becoming attuned. Once a place of exile, now transformed into a locus of creativity and power, of possibility, of kinship and connectivity where vibrant matter surrounds and infuses us, where boundaries are fluid and joyful encounters create provocative, unexpected and vibrant synergies... where the potential for what a body can do seems limitless.

¹⁸ Ten Bos, R and Willmott, H ‘Towards a Post-Dualistic Business Ethics: Interweaving Reason and Emotion in Working Life’, 2001

¹⁹ Balibar, E. *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality* (Meddelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis 71). Delft: Eburon, 1997: p11

²⁰ *ibid*: p15

²¹ Manning, E ‘Artfulness’ in *The Nonhuman Turn* University of Minnesota Press, 2015 p45 – 79

²² Gibson, P *The Plant Contract* Brill Rodopi, 2018

²³ Irigaray, L *To Be Two* The Athlone Press, 2000

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